

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

15 JUNE 2024

I would like to start by thanking you for all your support after my recent operation for prostate cancer. I've been overwhelmed by the cards, emails and messages of support. I've felt wonderfully upheld in prayer. The surgeon tells me he has removed all the cancer and although I will be under surveillance for five years, I don't need any more treatment. I also want to thank my colleagues who've had to take on extra work to cover for me and, of course, I give thanks to God!

Year of Spiritual Renewal and Wellbeing

I hope you are already aware that for some months we have been planning a Year of Spiritual Renewal and Wellbeing for our churches, schools and chaplaincies for 2025. The Archbishop of Canterbury is coming to the diocese on Saturday 16th November this year to launch it, so please put the date in your diary. We will be providing financial and personnel support so that many of us can go on quiet days, retreats and pilgrimage. We also want to reflect on how we can increase levels of wellbeing at a time when many people are feeling under pressure. For the past two years we have circulated questionnaires about clergy wellbeing which are informing our work and we want to build this further. More information will be coming your way soon.

Praying for the General Election

We are just a few weeks away from a General Election. When we pray the Lord's Prayer we say: '*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven*'. It is entirely right that Christians across the country join in concerted prayer for those who will govern us for the next five years.

St Paul urged people to pray for their leaders when he wrote to Timothy: *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.* (1 Timothy 2. 1-2)

Our archbishops echoed his words when they posted a statement after the General Election was announced. They wrote: *We are facing epic challenges both in our country and in our world: from questions of war and peace, to poverty and injustice and the very future of the Earth God has given to us.*

Faced with such huge questions, our instinct as Christians is to turn to God in prayer, and so we want to put prayer at the very heart of this campaign.

We are therefore inviting everyone who is willing to dedicate the next few weeks as a time not just to think about the big questions but to pray for our nation and our world. And we want to invite everyone to think about how we can all play our part both as voters and, more broadly, as citizens.

To help us pray, the Church of England has produced some resources entitled [Pray your Part](#). These are available in booklet form and can also be accessed online via the Church of England website. For the next three weeks there is a page for each day with a bible verse, a reflection and a prayer. These are integrated into a social media initiative with videos to encourage us to pray for all those who are standing for election. I know you may already feel saturated with coverage of the election, but I have seen some of the material that the Church of England has produced and it is excellent and mercifully free of the knockabout exchanges we get on the media. So I do encourage you to at least look at it. You may find it helpful and, in an age easily given to cynicism, even inspirational.

The Crisis in Mental Health

In the middle of last month St Albans hit the national headlines when twenty head teachers called on parents to stop children having a smartphone before they are 14 years old. This call has been supported by a raft of head teachers across the country.

So what's going on? Is it just that students are distracted from their studies by their phones? It is that they are sending out damaging social media tweets about each other in schooltime causing upset? Well that may be part of it, but there are now claims that smart phones are causing more than minor problems.

This is set out in an interesting and important book written by Jonathan Haidt, Professor of Ethical Leadership in the Stern School of Business in New York University. The book is called *The Anxious Generation* and it has been in the top best sellers list now for several weeks. Jonathan Haidt writes both as a respected academic and a parent.

The problem he is addressing is the rapid and significant rise in mental health problems affecting people of all ages, but which is having a particular impact on younger people. His book charts the dramatic increase in mental health problems among young people in the United

States, but we know that there is a similar increase here. The NSPCC and the Children's Society have raised the alarm in the UK because the number of children in England needing treatment for serious mental health problems has risen by 39% in a year. Referrals for specialist treatment have risen from 839,570 in 2020-21 to 1.1m in 2021-22. Dr Elaine Lockhart, chair of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Faculty at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, has pointed out that this covers the whole range of mental health problems in children, ranging from those who are suicidal, self-harming, have eating disorders to those who experience serious depression, anxiety or addiction.

Haidt argues that the primary cause of this increase is what he calls the 'Great Rewiring' of adolescents' brains which, he argues, has been caused by three technological developments. The first is the availability of smartphones with apps. The second is the installation of front-facing cameras on smartphones which enables people to take selfies. And finally, the development of algorithms and the ability to repost and retweet.

He writes: 'Once young people began carrying the entire internet in their pockets, available to them day and night, it altered their daily experiences and developmental pathways across the board,' and 'The new phone-based childhood that took shape roughly 12 years ago is making young people sick and blocking their progress to flourishing in adulthood'.

In his book *The Anxious Generation*, Haidt argues that there is a direct *causal* link between these technological developments and the rise in mental health problems and he suggests that it affects boys differently from girls.

Haidt makes his case by describing the way that children's brains develop. In the past children have grown up with freedom to play with other children, to experiment and to take risks. Nowadays some risk-averse parents, fearing for their children's safety, have discouraged this, whilst at the same time opening them up to a dangerous, often unregulated online world which can be cruel and which enables cyber bullying, and gives access to online gambling and pornography. The result is higher levels of self-harm, eating disorders and addictions. Despite the fact that Haidt offers detailed research to back up his findings, there are a number of academics who are not yet persuaded. And, of course, it is in the interest of the high-tech companies to argue against his research because it places much of the blame for the significant growth in mental health problems on their shoulders.

In the light of his findings, Haidt makes four recommendations:

- No smart phones before the age of fourteen
- No access to social media before the age of sixteen
- Create phone-free schools
- Provide greater opportunities for unsupervised play.

On a positive note, and this is where it becomes especially important for us in the churches because it corresponds to ancient wisdom, Jonathan Haidt argues that we need to draw on traditional spiritual disciplines and practices to counteract the decline in mental health. He proposes six areas where we need to act. He suggests the need for

1. Shared sacredness where we intentionally set aside times and places for shared, real-time experiences;
2. Embodiment and real-world experiences, such as eating together;
3. Silence, stillness and focus rooted in practices such as prayer and meditation;
4. Transcending the self in worship, which takes you out of self-absorption;
5. Be slow to anger and quick to forgive (social media tends to be have the opposite effect on its users); and
6. Find awe in nature. This chimes with those who are already running 'forest church'.

I do not know whether Haidt's analysis is accurate but I do know we are facing a worrying growth in mental health problems. I commend his book and findings to you and hope that it will trigger a wider debate in Britain and be taken up by whichever party wins the General Election and forms our next Government. I hope too that his findings will garner support in our churches, children's and youth groups, schools and chaplaincies as week by week in the name of Jesus Christ we seek the welfare and flourishing of our children and young people.

+Alan St Albans